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SUBJECT: New Peril on the Trails - Maoist Banditry
Against Foreigners

Ref: 01 Kathmandu 2323

1. Summary. Three recent incidents of Maoists demanding "donations" from American citizens in Nepal's backcountry, coupled with an increase in reported robberies from other Western tourists, create a new area of concern for the security of American citizens traveling in Nepal's remote areas. Questions about whether previous robberies were perpetrated by local hoodlums rather than Maoists no longer apply. Clear evidence indicates that in all three of these attacks against American citizens (and other Westerners who have been robbed recently) the perpetrators were Maoists. End Summary.

Sudden End for Karnali River Raft Trips

2. ConOff received a phone call this weekend from an anxious AmCit requesting Embassy assistance to get out of Nepal early after his rafting excursion was held up by armed Maoists on the Karnali River in Western Nepal. The incident occurred two days prior to the end of the nine-day raft trip, below the confluence of the Seti and Karnali Rivers in Kailali District when armed Maoists (first five, then 30 in number) entered the group's evening camp.

3. The raft company's managing director later confirmed to ConOff that the Maoists, armed with guns and socket bombs, spouted Maoist philosophy to his staff while demanding they give up one of the expedition's rafts "as help for the country". The Maoists' initial demands also included 50 USD per "client" -- they settled for 10,000 rupees total (approx. 130 USD) plus several life jackets. The raft company's director, who also serves as President of Nepal's Rafting Association, has told all other rafting companies to cease running the Karnali River for the indefinite future. This rafting run is in a rather remote area within striking distance of the Maoist heartland. We were frankly surprised to learn that the Karnali River was still being run by rafting expeditions.

Maoists Hit Climbing Expeditions to Makalu

4. On April 20, a Nepali daily newspaper reported an American climber's web-site description of Maoist robberies hitting three international expeditions during their approach to climb the world's fifth highest peak, Makalu. The Himalayan Times story, entitled "Now, Maoists target tourists", states in pertinent part:

According to the Associated Press, one of the mountaineers, who wrote about the incident on the Internet website on Friday, said climbers belonging to three teams were forced to give Rs 10, 000 (\$128) each to the guerrillas. The teams were robbed on their way to the base camp, from where they posted their report on the website. [Note: website is located at EverestNews.com]

"A group of five Maoists - four wearing special jackets and carrying grenades along with an armed Maoist carrying an automatic rifle - came to our camp on April 5 morning," Raymond Coughron, an energy management consultant from Berkeley, California, said. In the beginning, the guerrillas demanded Rs. 5,000 (\$64) plus cameras, binoculars and altimeters, but after some negotiations, they settled for Rs 10,000 (\$128) per member, Coughron said.

"It was clear that they were not alone. In the surrounding forests, hundreds of their comrades could be seen," he said. "After our expedition members paid them the amount and received a receipt, the Maoists went to members of the Swiss expedition team and repeated the act. The Spanish expedition was approached the night before," he stated.

Fulbrighter Threatened and Robbed, Reportedly Because of
USG Sponsorship

15. American Fulbright scholar Jeffrey Potter reports that on February 23, he and his fianc were visited in their residence "by the local Maoist commander and 23 of his armed friends". Potter, a University of Wisconsin grad student who formerly served as a Peace Corps volunteer here, was conducting ethnographic research in the small village of Benchan located in remote Sankhuwasaba District . During the ensuing half-hour lecture, the commander informed Potter that the Maoists liked him personally, but that they didn't like the U.S. Government and, because he was sponsored by the USG it was time for him to go. The Maoists also relieved Potter of 2,000 rupees (26 USD) and his camera. He left the village immediately and continues to write up his research within the confines of the Kathmandu Valley.

Incidents on the Rise -- Maoists or Hoodlums?

16. Although robberies of Westerners on the trail have been reported several times in the past, it was previously unclear whether some of these incidents were perpetrated by actual Maoists or simply local gangs of youths. There are, undoubtedly, thefts by hoodlums. However, the circumstances of recent incidents strongly indicate that Maoist cadres are committing many, if not most, of the rising spate of robberies in Nepal's hinterlands. Weapons and uniforms are not the only indicators of Maoist affiliation. Maoists characteristically detain their victims for some time - they don't just take the money and run. They often spend hours haranguing the Westerners' Nepali guides and porters about Maoist philosophy, ridiculing them for not taking part in the "great work" and attempting to convert them to the cause. They often provide printed "donation receipts" embossed with the likenesses of Mao, Lenin, Stalin, Marx and Engels.

17. Another telling proof of Maoist involvement is the increase in the number of robberies that have occurred since the end of November when the Maoists abrogated their cease-fire with the GON. In the same week as the first large scale attacks, including the battle in Phaplu where an AmCit student spent the night hiding under a stairwell (see Reftel), there were three separate instances where Dutch trekkers were held up and robbed of cameras and money by Maoists in nearby Salleri. Within the past four months more than a dozen Western trekking parties have been detained and robbed.

18. On March 5, armed Maoists stopped a trekking party on the previously heavily traveled Milkedanda trail near Chainpur, Sankhuwasaba District. After confiscating cameras and money the trekkers were told "Thank you for your donation, but never come to this area again". In Mugu District, German trekkers were robbed by a well-armed group of young attackers (reportedly all aged between 9 - 20 years and mostly girls). Other German parties have recently been held up and robbed by armed groups in Rowailing Valley (Dolakha District) and in Humla District, where Westerners often embark for the overland "pilgrimage" route to Mount Kailash in Tibet. [Note: ConOffs arranged an emergency helicopter evacuation of Americans from Simikot, Humla two months ago in the midst of a battle between Maoists and GON forces. End Note] A British climbing group headed toward Kanchanjanga Base Camp (in the far eastern district of Taplejung) was also robbed and most of its equipment was carried off by alleged Maoists.

19. Because of the number of recent trail robberies and other security concerns, the French Embassy has issued a warning advising French travelers to confine their Nepal forays solely to the Kathmandu Valley, Pokhara, Chitwan National Nature Reserve and the Annapurna, Langtang and Everest treks. [Note: Last Thursday Maoists bombed and destroyed a major bridge on the only road linking Kathmandu with the Langtang trek trailhead, effectively cutting off access for the time being. We expect that the bridge will be restored fairly soon. End Note.] In an effort to bolster lagging tourist arrivals, the GON last Fall opened approximately 100 new mountains as "trekking peaks" with lowered climbing fees. Unfortunately, most of these new "trekking peaks" are located in regions where we cannot presently advise U.S. citizens that it is safe to travel. Royal Bardia National Park is virtually closed down, because of Maoist activities in the area. The adventure experience in Nepal is swiftly becoming constricted.

10. [Comment] The sudden rash of international tourists accosted during expeditions and treks by Maoists for money and equipment is a major new area of concern for

the security of Americans visiting Nepal. The Embassy's current advice for Americans is to avoid all nighttime road travel outside the Kathmandu Valley, to limit road travel outside the Valley to the greatest extent possible and to contact the Embassy before undertaking travel to outlying areas. If security conditions continue to worsen, we may be forced to tighten the caution concerning travel outside the Valley even further.

Malinowski